

CASTRO REVOLUTION: SOCIAL CHANGE
IN CUBA

A Term Paper
Presented to
United States Army Chaplain School

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Course of
Effective Writing
USACHC&S Advance Course

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March 1975

STYLE OF PAPER

This research paper follows the form and style found in Form and Style in Thesis Writing, by William Giles Campbell.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of the Castro Revolution in Cuba and to analyze its influence for social change in that country.

Method of Paper. The method used in this paper is that of examining the causal conditions of the Castro Revolution by comparing and contrasting the pre-revolution Cuba with the post-revolution Cuba in the areas of the socio-economics and politico realm and to determine the impact of the Revolution for change in these areas under study.

Limitations of Paper. This paper is not an attempt to treat the Castro Revolution in an exhaustive manner, but to examine the Revolution in terms of its impact on social, economics, and political changes in Cuba. Thus, it is not an attempt to explain all the causal factors of the Revolution, nor to examine in detail all the political ramifications in terms of the relationships between the United States and Cuba, although the change in the political scene in Cuba certainly affected these relations.

Definition of Terms Used. For the purposes of this paper when the word "revolution" is used, it is in reference to that revolution led by Fidel Castro which began officially in 1959. It is acknowledged here that Castro had undertaken previous moves to depose the existing government which failed such^{as} his July 1953 uprising.

I. PRE-REVOLUTION CUBA

"Great men may owe at least part of their greatness to conducive social settings and sometimes social conditions may cause normal men to behave in ways that appear "stupid" in historical retrospect."¹ Such a statement appears to this student to be appropriate in describing the socio-economic - politico conditions which constituted Pre-Revolution Cuba, and which appear to have led to the Revolution.

In order to understand the conditions which led to the Revolution, it is necessary for one to examine Cuba before the Revolution. The areas of specific interest are the socio-economic and the political areas.

Political. Any interpretation of the political conditions of Cuba prior to the Revolution of necessity warrants a look at that political history beginning no later than the period in which Cuba was under the Platt Admendment, 1902-1934. It is during this period that Cuba was granted her independence from American tutelage. While Cuba was given its independence, the United States, through the Platt Admendment, still maintained "the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence, the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property and individual liberty."²

1 Stephen Cole, Sociological Method, p. 15.

2 Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America, p. 400.

It should be noted here that this admendment also limited the ability and the authority of Cuba to make foreign treaties on her own.

While the Platt Admendment gave a certain security to the United States, it nevertheless made Cuba free, "but not free to make its own mistakes."³ This placed the leaders of Cuba in a most awkward position; they were expected to please their own people, plus insuring the appeasement of the United States.

Cuban politics, although getting a good start under the first president, Estrada Palma, rapidly degenerated after the year of 1909. "There was increased venality in public office, betrayal of trust by presidents, and finally gross rule by violence."⁴ Finally in 1933 "The Sergeants' Revolt" headed by Sergeant Fulgencio Batista overthrew the "Washington made" government and Batista became the most powerful man on the island. He appointed Ramon Grau San Martin as provisional president and soon thereafter took his place.

In 1934, Batista, after the Platt Admendment was nullified by the United States, began to rule through puppet presidents

3 Ibid., p. 400.

4 Ibid., p. 402.

as a dictator. IN 1940, he assumed the presidency and until 1944, "gave Cuba better government than it had ever had."⁵

In 1944, Batista stepped aside and his successors slipped back into corrupt governments. This led to his eventual return to power.

In 1952, Batista made his illegal return to power and began his thorough dictatorship which lasted until 1959 when Castro led his successful revolt; Batista's reign was characterized "by growing repression, terrorism by the police and violent reprisals from angry citizens."⁶

Socio-Economic Conditions. Under the Batista dictatorship(1952-59) Cuba did not suffer economically. "On the eve of the Revolution of 1959, Cuba was one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America."⁷ From its earliest dates Cuba has shown the tendency to be structured more after the capitalist economy than toward the socialism strain; but, the capitalist system which was so economically feasible for other societies, only served to chain Cuba to her sugar and sugar cane, and thus to an unending cycle of economics. "During the first quarter of the century the very definition

5 Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America, p. 402.

6 Ibid., p. 405.

7 James R. O'Connor, Origins of Socialism in Cuba, p. 1.

of economic growth was the expansion of cane cultivation and sugar manufacture."⁸

During the next thirty years, the economy began to expand in the branches of other productions; however, all of these were based upon a fluctuating export trade that Cuba had no part in controlling.

The United States played a direct roll in the stagnating of the Cuban economy. Cuba became dependent upon imports from America. United States investments in Cuba meant management from foreigners; thus, an investment policy was followed that did not have Cuba's primary interest at heart. In 1958, more than a billion dollars were invested by investors from America.⁹ With these investments, the Cuban urban middle class became dependent upon foreign investments and thus became integrated into the United States capitalist system.¹⁰ This dependent status dissipated the influence that the middle class should have borne in this economic struggle for survival. This ineffectiveness of the middle class played a great part in the success of the Revolution.

The next stage to the pre-revolution economy of Cuba

8 Ibid., p. 15.

9 Ibid., p. 21.

10 Ibid., p. 23.

was that of nationalism or Cubanization of the sugar industry. Perhaps the single one act that brought about the spirit of nationalism in Cuba was the Reciprocal Trade Agreement of 1934. This agreement meant that "in the hands of the United States were place life and death decisions over the Cuban economy."¹¹ This act followed by the Sugar Act of 1948, had to draw a response of hostility from the Cubans. During this period Cuban workers acquired a class consciousness and labor unions developed.

The industrialization program embarked on in the 1950's was the final step in the development of Cuban nationalism. But Batista, in the role of dictator, failed in this attempt at industrialization primarily because of the political moves of his predecessors and his own political moves made some twenty years earlier. He needed national autonomy, but instead, he had helped tie Cuba to a financial dependence upon the United States. At home he was surrounded by officials that did not have any concerns about Cuba, the U.S., or nationalism but only themselves and what was best for them.

It is to this economic climate that Castro addressed himself as early as 1953.

During the 1950's under the dictatorship of Batista, mismanagement of the economy was the norm. After the failure

11 James R. O'Connor, Origins of Socialism in Cuba, p. 26.

of nationalism, Batista began to have economic problems in almost every area of production. These problems were brought about largely by gross mismanagement of cane cultivation, agricultural productions, and cattle ranchers. It was this mismanagement of the economy that helped the revolutionaries have a fortified front for their revolutionary movement of 1959.

II. THE REVOLUTION GOVERNMENT

"Cuba was not, on the eve of the Revolution, by any means a developed country."¹² As one examines the social, economical, and political areas of life, he cannot help but to see the stagnation that was developed within Cuba between 1923 and 1958. Such conditions have been enumerated already in this paper; however, it should be emphasized that this "stagnation was more serious and lasted longer than in any other Latin American economy."¹³ Such a crisis in economy produced certain characteristics within the Cuban society that could be seen as normal social reactions of any economic/political crisis: (1) "There was no money for technical research; (2) Mechanization was opposed by work-

12 Dudley Seers, Cuba: Economic and Social Revolution, p. 3.

13 Ibid., p.13.

ers; (3) wages for laborers remained high; (4) resistance to foreign workers became the norm; (5) foreign investments were discouraged by government controls."¹⁴

As the revolutionary government took control of Cuba, it started with both advantages and disadvantages. These played a tremendous part in the formation of the new government and the actions taken by it.

Disadvantages. The revolutionary government of Cuba was at a disadvantage from its outset due to its dependence upon export of only a single crop and imports of all advanced technological measures.

Another weakness was Cuba's ties to America. America was the chief outlet for all Cuban imports and exports. It is a dangerous thing to be tied to any one country as was Cuba to America. However, there were times when this closeness with the United States was very beneficial to Cuban economy.

"Social factors represented a disadvantage to the revolutionary government of Cuba."¹⁵ The attitude toward work by the people reflected more of a desire for profit-making through vices rather than work; added to this, the fact of

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

Cuba's low educational structure, the social conditions of Cuba all point to disadvantages which would be disadvantageous to any government in its initial stages.

Advantages. While Cuba's revolutionary government inherited many disadvantages, yet it "started with advantages unknown to the other socialist regimes on taking power."¹⁶

There was not the arduous task facing this revolutionary government that many other such governments faced in the rebuilding of the physical developments which might have resulted had an international war been fought.

Cuba had a firm political base which gave a sound basis for nationalism. Laborers were already accustomed to organized and disciplined paid employment."¹⁷ Cuba had already in existence a grand communications network which gave quick access to public notices of changed policies.

A third advantage enjoyed by Cuba's new government was that of the readiness of the Soviet Union to grant instant credit.

One of the more important advantages is that the common people were looking for a Messiah. This is demonstrated by such statements as "believe me when I say that a revolution was

16 Dudley Beers, Cuba: Economic and Social Revolution, p. 25.

17 Ibid., p. 25.

inevitable."¹⁸ Such statements give insight into the attitude of the working classes in Cuba during the dictatorship of Batista.

Social change in Cuba was inevitable; whether it was to come by way of social involvement or by revolution was the question.

When disorganization grows to the degree that it can no longer be contained within the prevailing system, attempts at reorganization are likely to be made; some-involving far-reaching changes of the social structure.... If the advocated changes are blocked, a revolutionary potential is created and the social movements are likely to become revolutionary movements.¹⁹

Causes for revolutions might also be seen not only in situations of totally crushed groups of people but also in the emergence of a group of people who are on the way up and who are, themselves, discontent with the existing conditions. When their ascent is "wholly or partially blocked ... by an inflexible government, a revolution is likely to occur."²⁰

It is with the last two thoughts of revolutionary causes within a society that this student feels any analysis of

¹⁸ James O'Connor, Cuba's Counter Revolution, p.8.

¹⁹ Amitai Etzioni, Social Change, p. 404.

²⁰ Loc. cit.

the Castro Revolution must contend. It is this student's belief that Castro was on his way up; and, when met by the inflexible, unbending government of Batista, he led his revolution which had been formed as early as 1953 and perhaps even earlier than that date.

III. POST-REVOLUTION CUBA

In his book, Cuba: Economic and Social Revolution, Dudley Seers divides the institutional history of Cuba since the Revolution into four phases. "The first, from January, 1959, to June 1960, was a period in which there was little attempt at government control."²¹ There was not real intervention on the part of the Revolution leaders in business transactions with America, nor was there any disruption in the practice of private ownership.

The second period was from June 1960, to February 1961. During this period there was rapid change. The oil refineries and other foreign companies were nationalized, cooperatives were formed to handle sugar reforms, banks were taken. At this time even the Cuban-owned businesses were taken over. State farms came into existence, and the trade direction shifted from the United States toward the Soviet Union.

A third phase began in February 1961. This apparently

²¹ Seer, op. cit., p. 45.

was the planning phase. The term "euphoric planning"²² fits better here. The leaders envisioned Cuba as an advanced industrial economy by the year 1965. It was during this period that the great plans for the "great harvest" were made.

In March 1962 the fourth phase was initiated, that of rationing of commodities. This ~~was~~^{was} perhaps the first step of realism taken by the Revolution leaders.

Political Conditions. While the leaders of the Cuban Revolution were aware of the stagnant conditions of Cuba what distinguished them from Batista and his predecessors was the fact they "were willing to carry out their solutions in practice, no matter what the political repercussions or implications."²³ It is with this in the background that led the Revolution leaders into the Socialist vein. The people of Cuba were disappointed with Capitalism and thus were easily led into Socialism. In evaluating the impact of the Revolution on the social system of Cuba one must not only ask is Cuba of yesterday (prior to 1959) different from Cuba since 1959, but also is it better today than yesterday.

The new political system in Cuba is one of Communist

22 Dudley Seer, Cuba: Economic and Social Revolution, p. 47.

23 O'Connor, op. cit., p. 279.

Socialism. Castro does not admit that at this early stage of his revolution he was indeed a communist, but admits to being only a type of Marxist-Leninist.²⁴ This political system today in Cuba is a communist dictatorship where elections are not held as we in America view elections. It is because of this type of government that the United States broke off relations with Cuba. However, Cuba has "survived fifteen years of U.S. hostility and now has diplomatic relations with seventy-four countries."²⁵ Cuba's communist state gives the impression that it is permanent and no longer can be looked upon as "tropical Marxism" as it was once referred to by European Communists in January 1959. To the people of this island Castro is the hero and the one who has ultimate authority, while the Communist Party is seen as the guide and teacher.²⁶

The confidence that the people of Cuba may lack in their new system of government is not shared by their leaders. Having a blank check of credit with the Soviet Union, Castro and his leaders have desires to end its isolation with the U.S. and obtain modern technology. They are willing to risk

24 Theodore Draper, Castro's Revolution, p. 152.

25 "U.S. News and World Report," October 28, 1974, p. 44.

26. Ibid., p. 45.

this tie with the U.S. only because they feel their people have been made secure in their Communist beliefs through an intensive indoctrination program.

This political government is evangelistic in its approach to other countries of Latin America.

Socio-Economic Conditions. From the beginning of the Revolution in January 1959, until the present, the Revolution has undergone many phases. In 1961, the Soviet method of rapid industrialization failed. In 1963, "the Chinese method of collective farms did not work."²⁷ When each of these systems failed, Castro initiated other methods of change.

Some success has been reached in social conditions under Castro. In the New York Times Magazine of December 1, 1974, one doctor states that because the people are obedient to the Revolution, they are living in the only Latin American country that has no misery, no slums, no flagrant contrast between unlimited private wealth and beggars in the streets, no malaria, no polio, very little child mortality and practically no illiteracy as it was once known in Cuba.

Prosperity has not come to Cuba, but there is a sense of economic ease, thanks to Soviet aid, the soaring price of sugar and more orthodox methods of economic management.

27 "New York Times Magazine" December 1, 1974, p. 27.

The rate of economic growth is about five percent a year;²⁸ however, the consumer still waits in long lines and rationing is still a necessary evil that the people still must face.

Castro has utilized the mobilization of people to get his work ideas across. An example of this is the literacy problem in Cuba. Faced with a high illiteracy rate, Castro sent out thousands of people into the countryside to teach the masses to read. In 1970, Castro sent out a million volunteers to reap a cane harvest of ten million tons. This failed and proved to be the factor which turned Castro from seeking "heroic" visionary solutions toward a more patient approach to improvements, good management and an awareness of the limitations of man, even under Socialism.²⁹

CONCLUSION

It has not been the purpose of this paper to go into detail concerning the rightness or wrongness of the Castro Revolution, nor to explain its success or its failures.

The Revolution did bring with it a change in the social structure of Cuba. This was a change in almost every area

28 "New York Times Magazine," December 1, 1974, p. 29.

29 Ibid., p. 103.

of society, but noticeably in those areas of political views and socio-economics.

To the common laborer in Cuba prior to the Revolution, the Revolution was a necessity; but, to those in leadership and places of responsibility it was an error. It would be a mistake in this student's opinion for one to say that the Revolution has been totally successful, for there still exists in Cuba feelings of uneasiness and dissatisfaction. Castro has attempted to socialize the entire island, but he has not been totally successful.

The Cuban economy has declined since 1959, due to the U.S. trade blockade, bad weather, and no replacements for machinery parts; but, a major and significant factor for the decline has been the absence of a strong middle class. Castro has allowed most of the efficient middle class managers to leave the country.³⁰

In today's Cuba Castro seems to be leaning toward a more rational approach to industrialization, and aided by the rise in the cost of sugar plus the Soviet Union blank check for credit, Castro has hopes of becoming a competitive member in all Latin American affairs. A great deal depends upon her future attempts at improving her relationships in trade with the United States.

30 David D. Burks, Cuba Under Castro, p. 19.

The Revolution in Cuba has brought far-reaching social change. This change has taken place in the area of political structure, changing from a benevolent dictatorship to one of Communist Socialism, and in the social and economic spheres.

Prior to the Revolution a weak middle class in Cuba contributed immensely to the possibility of revolution. In Cuba today, the absence of any middle class stand out as a major contributor to an uneasy Cuba under a socialized government.

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